

Coins

Numismatic pioneer looks back on the trail he blazed

By Roger Boye

COIN COLLECTING HAS changed significantly since Richard S. Yeo saved an Indian-head cent he got from a paper route customer in 1915. But unlike other old-time collectors, Yeo has not only observed the changes; he has helped to cause many of them.

Yeo, better known by his professional and pen name of Yeoman, is author of the Red Book, the hobby "Bible" that has sold more than 15 million copies since the first edition was published in 1946. He also has written other popular coin references and had a big hand in designing the Whitman coin folders that revolutionized the hobby.

"Unlike years ago, there's a wide and permanent base of collectors in America today," Yeo said in the Racine, Wis., offices of Western Publishing Co. The 6-foot, white-haired man "who made coin collecting famous" is 74, but he

looks about 10 years younger.

Like most other hobby pros, Yeo estimates that between 5 and 10 million Americans collect coins today. But early this century, the hobby attracted a relatively small number of professionals and academicians who spent many hours studying coins; few people collected for enjoyment.

During the Depression, coin collector Yeo started working in the marketing and advertising departments of Whitman Publishing Co. in Racine (today called Whitman Coin Products, a division of Western Publishing). He soon was asked to promote a coin board that Whitman had acquired from a Wisconsin man.

Before the invention of the board, collectors had no easy way to store their numismatic treasures. Often, coins were laid flat in a drawer or dumped into an envelope or can.

The coin boards Whitman produced were large enough for framing, but they could not be stored easily, nor did they offer coins much protection.

That prompted Yeo to design a 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ -by-7 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch blue folder that was easy to use and protected coins to some extent. The folders, which went on the market in 1940 and have been used by millions of collectors, were not readily accepted by everyone.

"Some Chicago dealer in the early '40s would snicker when I came in with the folder; they said it was not numismatics, that people didn't learn anything by putting coins in a folder," Yeo said. "But I never claimed the folder was numismatics; it just simplifies coin collecting."

The complaining dealers soon realized that folder sales paid their rent, and their criticism waned, Yeo added. Today, coin scholars acknowledge that the folder designed by Yeo has done much to popularize the hobby.

So has the Red Book—also called "A Guide Book of United States Coins"—that has been published annually since 1946. Yeo wrote the book for "collectors who are no longer neophytes," and included much information

about the history of United States coins, along with the retail price information.

Another popular Yeo book, the Blue Book or "Handbook of United States Coins," was first published by Whitman four years before the Red Book. It lists the average dealer buying prices for coins, but does not contain as much explanatory material as the Red Book.

Before Yeo retired from Whitman in 1970, he wrote other books, including "Catalog of Modern World Coins" and "Current Coins of the World." Today, the Red and Blue books are edited by Kenneth Bressett, although Yeo remains a consultant for all the Whitman books that carry his name. He also assists with compiling price information for the Blue Book during the six months each year that he and his wife live in Racine. During the cold weather, they move to Green Valley, Ariz.

From either location, Yeo remains a keen observer of the numismatic scene and still attends coin shows and conventions.